

IX

THE FOOD QUEST

262 THE principal constituents of Melanesian diet having been discussed in the previous chapter, the present one will be devoted to a description of the methods by which this food is obtained. Since vegetable produce, and in particular the taro plant, forms by far the greatest part of the diet of these people, this will first be dealt with, followed by hunting and fishing, the means whereby flesh food is provided as a much-needed 'relish' to the vegetable diet.

HORTICULTURE

244 Horticultural activities centre mainly round the provision of
● 242 a sufficient crop of taro for their daily needs, with an excess at certain times for use at ceremonial feasts. This is by no means an easy task. Taro makes heavy demands on the soil, so that in the absence of any knowledge of fertilizers or of the principle of rotation of crops, a patch which has produced a crop of taro cannot be used again till it has had time to recover. In the case of the large
[412] taro garden near Kurtatchi, I was told that this particular patch was last cleared by men who used stone axes, long before the oldest men in the village were born, and that it will not be used again till the sons of the present generation of babies are grown men. I suppose that this practice must, at some time or other, have been adopted as the result of experience. At any rate, they know that if you plant again in the same garden too soon the taro will be small and will not grow well.

The result of this policy is that the men and boys must see to it that fresh patches of cleared ground are always ready for the women to replant the stalks of the tubers they take out daily for their household needs. It is not always realized, I think, how large an area of land a primitive community needs to support itself, even if not nomadic. At present the inhabitants of this region have plenty of land at their disposal for the necessary shifting of their gardens, though even now gardens are often several miles from the village to which they belong. But if there should arise in the future any

THE FOOD QUEST

299

great increase in the demand for land for commercial coco-nut plantations, it might become a serious problem. It is the practice of the Government, however, to consider very carefully all requests for land on the part of white people, and in view of the doubtful future of the copra market, the situation may never become acute. Apart from this it would be to the advantage of the natives to learn more intensive methods of using their land, so that the women might be relieved of the necessity of carrying heavy loads of taro several miles back to the village. 242
244

A piece of ground which has been cultivated and subsequently left untouched very quickly 'goes back bush', and soon becomes indistinguishable from the rest of the forest. Since the practice of continually changing the locality of the gardens has been continued for a very long time, probably little, if any, of the 'bush' in the north-western corner of Bougainville, where the soil is suitable for taro-growing, is now virgin forest. Most of it is covered with secondary growth, with very few really large trees, but with great quantities of undergrowth and of 'bush banana' plants, which grow very rapidly. 137

The clearing of the bush is done mainly by the men and boys; the women help by taking out the smaller undergrowth and by removing rubbish. The work of fencing is performed mostly by men. It is very necessary owing to the depredations of the pigs. When this has been done, the subsequent weeding and care of the garden is the women's business, but their menfolk will often give a hand to help them. The young married couple Mataré and Maroté frequently went off to weed their garden together. I sometimes used to go and do a day's work with them, or with other friends, gaining thereby not only useful information, but also the gratitude of the owner of the plot and some much-needed exercise. The following description of one of these occasions is included for the sake of the details it gives of a scene which, apart from my intrusive self, may be regarded as typical: "This is being written in a taro garden, during a rest between two spells of work. We are sitting on a log under the shade of a banana palm, surrounded by taro plants at all stages of growth. A girl, somewhere in her teens, with a pipe in her mouth and flowers in her hair, is making holes in the ground with the sharpened end of a pole, while another girl drops taro stalks into them. Their bright red loin-cloths make a splash of colour in a picture that is otherwise much too green. 244
262
244